

ETHNOLOGY

Counting Riches in Wives

A Husband in Yoruba-Land Is Rated as Poor Indeed If He Has Only a Niggardly Seventy-Five in the Harem

By DR. FRANK THONE

SUPPOSE it were discovered that the mayor of your city had 75 wives! Some scandal, eh? You can imagine how the tongues would wag.

But suppose, on listening to said wagging of tongues, you found that he was not being criticized for having 74 too many wives, but rather for having 150 too few. Suppose you heard your neighbors saying, "That mayor of ours is a mere piker. Imagine—only 75 wives! Why, the mayor of Nexttown has a harem of 200. It's a disgrace to our city, that's what it is!" And the women even more outspoken in their criticism than the men.

An upside-down country, a Looking-Glass land? Not at all. A situation not essentially different from that obtains in a real earthly country, a spot on the map of our own earth. It exists right now. In Yoruba-land a man's importance is rated by the number of wives he has, and a really important personage with a mere beggarly 75 women in his household is counted pretty much of a piker.

Where is Yoruba-land? Turn to your map of Africa, to the big angle on the west coast, where the shoreline ceases its northward trend and swings toward the west. Out in the blue ocean you will find the label, "Bight of Benin." Inland from there, holding a part of the coast and stretching quite a distance into the hinterland, live the Yoruba tribes. They are of more or less the same racial stock, speaking languages that differ but which for the most part plainly spring from an original basic speech. The land of the Yorubas is colored with the far-flung British red, but a considerable degree of self-government and English tolerance of native custom prevails.

Great "Parish"

From a four-year sojourn in Yoruba-land recently returned an American missionary-scientist, Rev. Edward Ward, who is now continuing his studies at the Catholic University of America, in Washington, D. C. In his African "parish" of something like 10,000 square miles he had ample opportunity, as he

travelled around, to observe the ways of the people. They were friendly, and he spoke their language fairly well, and kept his eyes and ears open without asking too many direct questions. So he learned quite a lot.

The 75-wife "piker" was a real person; still is, for he is still living. He may by now have improved his status by getting some more wives, but at that time he was popularly rated as not amounting to as much as one of his subordinate chiefs, because the chief had a full 200 wives to check off against his sovereign's miserly 75.

Comment on Number

At times of great feasts, when all the kings and chiefs come together, attended by all their wives, "I noticed," Father Ward states, "that as the commoners closed in to see the sight they were always careful to note the number of wives each chief had. And that fact formed the nucleus of their conversation for the rest of the evening."

Why this great stress on the Importance of Being Married? Father Ward found a number of reasons: desire for more children, usefulness of extra wives as extra income-producers, etc., but by far the most important was something we encounter in a very slightly altered form in our more "civilized" society—the desire of a rich man to show off his success. With us a political "big shot," a leading merchant, a rich landowner, will build a big house and fill it with fine furniture, will drive a costly automobile, will load his wife with sables and diamonds. He will even brag about his bank balance and the size of his income tax.

The Yoruba rich man finds his style rather cramped, when it comes to showing off. There is no use acquiring land: you can't buy it, only get leasehold from the king or chief—and that's so cheap that it is of no use for purposes of ostentation. Nobody cares about fine houses; even big chiefs live in the simplest type of thatched huts. And furnishings are almost unknown.

Says Father Ward: "Old Sashere of Ondo, one of the five big chiefs of the town, was reputed to have bought about



WEDDING PARTY

In spite of almost unbearable heat, the guests are all dressed in unaccustomed garments which they will discard hurriedly as soon as they get home. Father Ward is in white soutane, seated beside the young bride.



YORUBA KING

The Abodi of Ikoyi is here wearing crown and regal garments and holds his staff of office. He rules over approximately 50,000 people and has a harem of more than one hundred wives aged from 15 to 70.

sixty wives during his time. Yet once when I went to salute him, he had not a chair to offer me. And he was one of the plutocrats of the land."

There is just one thing in Yorubaland that is really expensive—a wife. There is a standard minimum dowry fee, equivalent to \$62.50 in American money, that must be paid in good round coin of His Britannic Majesty to the bride's parents before the hopeful groom may lead her home. This dowry used to be paid in cowrie shells, before the white man came. But your native, who is nobody's fool when it comes to business, demands cash nowadays.

There are "marked-down" wives, like widows and women with illegitimate children, who can be acquired for as little as \$37.50, but these matrimonial bargains are really not much in demand. And the price of an especially desirable, fully "eligible" bride may range well above the standard \$62.50.

Besides the outright dowry-price, there have to be additional expenditures: gifts of palm wine and other dainties to the bride's parents, provisions for the wedding feast, a present for the bride her-

self. One very much married chief told Father Ward that on the average his weddings had cost him \$100 apiece.

So the Yoruba potentate or magnate, finding a good wife not only a man's chief treasure but about the only possible one, proceeds to stock up with just as many such treasures as he can dig up the cash for. There is even a class of *nouveau riche* in Yorubaland, who made their pile in the relatively new business of raising cocoa; they go in for large-scale domesticity in a very big way.

Here is a leaf from the Yoruba Social Register, numerical ratings being numbers of wives: "Alake of Abeokuta 400, Alafin of Oyo 250, Oba of Ilesha 250, Oni of Ife 200, Lisa of Ondo 200, Awujale of Ijebu 150, His Majesty the King of Oshogbo—only 75!"

Wives being so valuable, they are naturally inheritable property; if a man dies, his numerous sons divide his numerous wives between them. Father Ward tells of one lad who served him, who backslid from Christianity very promptly when he inherited his father's two wives at the mature age of fifteen! The tale is also told of a chief, interested in becoming a Christian but puzzled as to what to do with all his wives, offering a startled missionary a fair half of them! (Said missionary, it should be carefully stated, was *not* Father Ward.)

General Harmony

But how do so many wives in one house get on together? As a rule, pretty well, says the American missionary-scientist. Each wife has her own room in the harem, where she is sole mistress, where she lives with her children, where she keeps her private property—mats, calabashes, corn, fish, and the like—and with which no one dare tamper without her express permission. Usually the meals are prepared at a common fire in the courtyard, each wife attending to her own pot.

These daily household get-togethers are of course the great opportunities to exchange news and gossip—not neglecting, of course, the newest, spiciest scandal. "It is hard to get a word in edgewise when these women get together," remarks Father Ward. "They are all born orators."

Of course such social intercourse is not always idyllic. Sometimes a row breaks out—as often as not over what one woman's little boy has done to another woman's little boy. "The wives take sides. The group breaks up into pairs and each wife tries to gain the

upper hand by the pitch and eloquence of her voice and by dramatic and masterly gestures. But it is only a battle of words. Never a blow is struck."

And thereby hangs another tale of a much-married pagan chief who had come to think favorably of Christianity—all but the monogamy requirement. "I don't think you'll really understand how it is, Father," he said to the missionary, "because you aren't married at all. But it's this way. Women will talk, and if they talk they argue. And if I have a lot of 'em they'll argue with each other and let *me* alone!"

Not Disturbed

Father Ward gives confirmation to the spirit of this yarn, at least; he observed more than one roaring family row going full blast, while the one husband of all these wives sat placidly smoking his pipe, as though he were alone in the midst of primeval silence.

Of course, these huge harems of a hundred wives and up are only for chiefs and rich men. But lesser citizens have their modest domestic arrangements, too. The town clerk of the city of Ondo (pop. 30,000) where Father Ward had his headquarters was the proud husband of an even dozen. Artizans and moderately well-to-do farmers, who could afford multiple marriage, had from two to five or six.

In these middle-class households the extra wives are business assets. They do the lighter jobs around the farm, all the burden bearing (carrying anything is beneath the dignity of a male), and they do all the buying and selling. There are no businessmen in Yorubaland, only businesswomen. The husband gives his wives a substantial bit of money as initial trading capital, the women go to market with their wares, and when they return they turn over a reasonable share of the profits to their husband-capitalist. The duodecimally-married town clerk aforementioned told Father Ward that his wives kept him provided with all his food; he was never a penny out for "chop."

However, even in Yorubaland, this business of wives by the dozen or hundred is the exception. It has to be. British census figures show that the excess of females over males in the total population is only about six in the hundred. So only a few men, relatively speaking, have more than a wife apiece. Monogamy is the rule, multiple-wived households the conspicuous exception.

One thing that makes for monogamy,

and also for late marriage among the men, is the high cost of wives. It takes a poor man a long time to save up the necessary \$62.50. For the same reason, he looks his prospective bride over much more carefully than a richer man might, who could afford any number of wives. Where so much money is involved, marriage is a very serious business indeed. What we would call "trial marriage" is a very common thing among the Yoruba—often insisted upon by the bride's parents as well as by the groom.

Usually Happy

Yet marriage among the Yoruba is by no means the sordid thing that might be imagined, from all this talk of cash involvements. Husbands and wives usually get along quietly and contentedly, Father Ward reports, and he saw some marriages that were almost idyllic, even after a number of years.

The matrimonial situation in Yorubaland has of course been complicated considerably by the coming of foreigners. Many converts have been made by missionaries of three faiths, Catholic, Protestant, and Mohammedan. Each has its own marriage rules, which often run counter to those of the original native religion. Even Mohammedanism, which permits a man the same number of wives that the Prophet had—four—would cramp the style of a really ambitious native chief. And now British civil law permits divorce—which many Yoruba matrons are finding to their advantage.

And the worst of it is, there isn't any refund on your \$62.50. Even in Yorubaland, a man simply can't find any really good securities to invest his money in any more!

Science News Letter, June 5, 1937

This article was edited from manuscript prepared by Science Service for use in illustrated newspaper magazines. Copyright, 1937, by Every-Week Magazine and Science Service.

The National Bureau of Standards has found a way of depositing iron from an electrolytic bath five times as fast as the usual rate.

SEASICKNESS

Why Bring That Up?

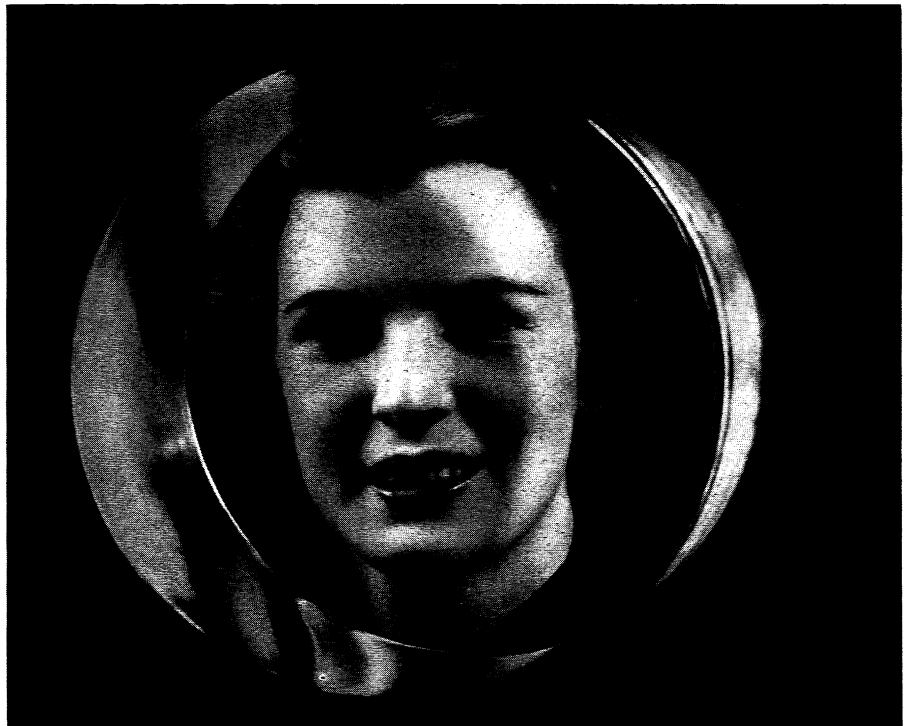
By Dr. Joseph Franklin Montague

What to do about Seasickness

142 Pages ● Helpful ● Humorous
\$2 Illustrated ● and AUTHORITATIVE

Home Health Library, Inc.
516 Fifth Avenue, New York City

SEASICKNESS



TRANSPARENT

This young lady is photographed through nine and one-half inches of water-clear plastic made in the United States.

PHYSICS

Accurate Cheap Lenses Made From Transparent Plastic

Eye Glass Lenses May Be Made 1,500 an Hour Without Grinding When Water-Clear Plastic is Used

SPECTACLE lenses produced at a rate of 1,500 an hour instead of being ground slowly and laboriously by hand, are only one possibility of the new transparent resin molded lenses now being exhibited in America by two British inventors. Eye glasses for all who need them at a cost measurable in cents instead of tens or twenties of dollars may some day be the result of thus achieving a long-held dream of molding optical lenses instead of fashioning them tediously by hand.

Good quality lenses on low price cameras and binoculars are another possibility already realized on a small scale. The entire important movement of copying the world's scientific and historic literature on microfilm and making it cheaply available to anyone anywhere, is also closely bound up with securing an

inexpensive optical viewing device which one could carry in the pocket or keep in a desk drawer.

The molding of lenses has intrigued industry, governments, scientists and engineers for years. Glass, with its high melting point and other characteristic properties has been abandoned as a likely molding material for any but the cheapest and poorest kind of optical equipment of 10-cent store quality. But ever since the discovery of the chemical plastic materials the dream of molding lenses has seemed nearer. The color and non-transparency of the plastics prior to a year ago was a hampering aspect. Lack of a technique for molding with accuracy needed for optical work was another.

In America, in England and in other countries plastics of remarkable water-clear transparency have been achieved.